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THE TRUE FACE OF MOUNT LU: ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PERSPECTIVES AND PARADIGMS[1]

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橫看成嶺側成峰，遠近高低各不同。
不識廬山真面目，只緣身在此山中。
蘇軾《題西林壁》

Viewed horizontally a range; a cliff from the side,
It differs as we move high or low, or far or nearby.
We do not know the true face of Mount Lu,
Because we are all ourselves inside.
—Su Shi, "Written on the Wall of the Temple of West Woods"

Man anders versteht, wenn man überhaupt versteht.
We understand differently, if we understand at all.
—H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*

ABSTRACT

From a hermeneutic point of view, understanding is always conditioned by one's own horizon and perspective. As the great poet Su Shi remarks, we do not know the "true face of Mount Lu" because what we see constantly changes as we move high or low, far off or up close. But the point of the "hermeneutic circle" is not to legitimize the circularity or subjectivity of one's understanding, but to make us conscious of the challenge. How do we understand China, its history and culture? What should be the appropriate paradigm or perspective for China studies? More than twenty years ago, Paul Cohen argued for a "China-centered" approach to understanding Chinese history, but to assume an insider's perspective does not guarantee adequate understanding any more than does an outsider's position guarantee emancipation from an insider's myopia or blindness. By discussing several exemplary cases in China studies, this essay argues that neither insiders nor outsiders have monopolistic or privileged access to knowledge, and that integration of different perspectives and their dynamic interaction beyond the isolation of native Chinese scholarship and Western Sinology may lead us to a better understanding of China and its history.

Keywords: China and the West, insider and outsider perspectives, paradigms, hermeneutics

1. This paper was first presented at a conference on "Paradigm in Flux" held at the University of California, San Diego, in April 2007. I want to thank Professors Yingjin Zhang and Paul Pickowicz for inviting me to that conference with its lively and stimulating discussions. I want to thank my friends Matthew Chen for an earlier comment and Chin-chuan Lee for calling my attention to Robert Merton's 1972 essay on insiders and outsiders. I feel particularly grateful to Brian Fay and the other reviewers for *History and Theory* whose comments and advice have helped to strengthen my argument. Any remaining weaknesses are of course my own responsibility.

The short poem on Mount Lu by one of the greatest Chinese poets, Su Shi (1037–1101), which reads like a Chan Buddhist *gaatha*, is well-known for articulating philosophical insights into the interaction between recognition and perspective, and it has often been understood as a reflection on the limitation and blindness of an insider's point of view, or the difficulty of knowing something up close. "Because we are all ourselves inside," says the poet in the famous last two lines, the very interiority of the location makes it impossible for us to know "the true face of Mount Lu." The implication seems to be that one must get out of the mountain to command a full view of it, and therefore an outsider may see it more clearly than someone inside the mountain. Such a reading would privilege an outsider's view, which of course has particularly positive implications for Sinology or China studies in the West that tries to understand China not from within, but from the outside. By virtue of being an outsider, a Sinologist or China specialist may occupy a better position than a native Chinese to understand China at some critical or reflective distance. That is indeed the view held by many China specialists in the West, justifiable to some extent, and apparently supported by a great Chinese poet's philosophical insight into the nature of horizons and perspectives, the limitation and blindness of someone inside the object of study.

Horizon or perspective happens to be an important concept in philosophical hermeneutics. Friedrich Nietzsche and Edmund Husserl made use of the concept, which was further developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer into a crucial term for understanding the very nature of understanding. "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point," says Gadamer. "Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded."[2] We all have our particular horizons or vantage points from which we see and understand things, and what we see must be within the range of our vision, tied to our "finite determinacy." Thus horizon constitutes the precondition of understanding or what Heidegger called the fore-structure of understanding. Before we understand anything, we already have some idea about that which we are to understand, that is, our anticipations or prejudgments, and the process of understanding appears to move in a "hermeneutic circle."

It is therefore inevitable that a Western China scholar would understand China from the horizon and perspective of a Westerner. The point of the hermeneutic circle, however, is not to confirm the necessity of circular movement, and certainly not to legitimize the circularity of understanding or the subjectivity of one's own horizon. Although he lays much emphasis on the fore-structure of understanding, "the point of Heidegger's hermeneutical reflection is not so much to prove that there is a circle as to show that this circle possesses an ontologically positive significance," says Gadamer. "All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought,

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 302.

and it must direct its gaze 'on the things themselves.'"[3] When we examine Sinology or China studies in the light of such a philosophical insight, then, we realize that to privilege an outsider's view is not really justifiable because it tends to overemphasize the significance of one's own horizon and perspective at the expense of what the other, and internal, perspective might have to offer.

That is precisely the major point Paul Cohen made more than twenty years ago in *Discovering History in China*, in which he consciously proposed a new paradigm in China studies, different from older ones in which Western scholars looked at China only from the outside, with an outsider's horizon. In his review of the development of American Sinology, Cohen found that most American China scholars in the 1950s were unable to break away from the theoretical framework of "Western impact and Chinese response" in their interpretation of recent Chinese history from the Opium Wars and the Boxer Uprising to the founding of the Chinese Republic. They all maintained that China would have remained stagnant and immobile if there were no impact from the West. The impact-and-response framework constituted the basic horizon for their understanding of Chinese history from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century.

Closely related to this was the theoretical framework of "modernization," which regarded modern Chinese history as a history of modernization and "equated *modern* with *Western* and *Western* with *important*."[4] As a result, the West and Western ideas became essential elements in the study of modern Chinese history, whereas Chinese elements unrelated to modernization were considered less important in such a framework. During the late 1960s, however, as the Civil Rights movement and the popular protest against the war in Vietnam raged all over America, a strong tendency of self-critique arose in the intellectual climate in the U.S. and in the West at large. In China studies a new framework emerged, which Cohen calls the framework of "imperialism." It is in fact a framework of anti-imperialism, a radically self-critical theoretical perspective that maintained that the study of modern Chinese history should be focused on the issue of how Western imperialism had stifled and impeded China's social development. Sharply critical of the West, this framework nevertheless understood modern Chinese history as basically a history of Western impact, even though it condemned the consequences of such an impact rather than viewing it in a positive light.

According to Cohen, these three paradigms—the frameworks of "impact and response," "modernization," and "imperialism"—all look at China from an outsider's perspective with little or no attention paid to the internal development of Chinese history, and "all three, in one way or another, introduce Western-centric distortions into our understanding of nineteenth- and twentieth-century China."[5] Against such West-centric distortions, Cohen advocates a "China-centered" approach to the study of Chinese history, an approach that lays emphasis on Chinese language materials and Chinese points of view. Cohen characterizes this approach in the following manner:

3. *Ibid*., 266-267.

4. Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 2.

5. *Ibid*., 3.

> The main identifying feature of the new approach is that it begins with Chinese problems set in a Chinese context. These problems may be influenced, even generated, by the West. Or they may have no Western connection at all. But either way they are *Chinese* problems, in the double sense that they are experienced in China by Chinese and that the measure of their historical importance is a Chinese, rather than a Western, measure.[6]

Of course, it is impossible to demand that Western China scholars all turn themselves into native Chinese. "The great challenge for Western historians is not the impossible one of eliminating all ethnocentric distortion," says Cohen; "it is the possible one of reducing such distortion to a minimum and in the process freeing ourselves to see Chinese history in new, less Western-centered ways."[7] The main point of Cohen's "China-centered history" is the recognition that modern Chinese history evolves along a path of its own, with its own structure, rather than being a passive receptacle of decisive outside influences from the West. To emphasize the history "experienced in China by Chinese" is obviously meant to emulate an insider's perspective, the horizon of those participants in the historical events. The use of the term "China-centered," says Cohen, "is intended to delineate an approach to recent Chinese history that strives to understand what is happening in that history in terms that are as free as possible of imported criteria of significance."[8] By putting emphasis on using Chinese language materials and identifying internal factors in Chinese history that played decisive roles in its development, Cohen tries to transcend the limitations of an outsider who lacks the sense of tangible reality and only has a blurred view of what is going on in China, to emulate an insider's perspective, horizon, and experience, and to set up a "China-centered" paradigm beyond the biased view skewed toward the West.

In a more recent book, Cohen clearly states that his "abiding concern" throughout his career as a historian has been his "determination to get inside China, to reconstruct Chinese history as far as possible as the Chinese themselves experienced it rather than in terms of what people in the West thought was important, natural, or normal . . . in short, to move beyond approaches to the Chinese past that bore a heavy burden of Eurocentric or Western-centric preconceptions."[9] The key feature of his "China-centered" paradigm, Cohen later reiterates, is "to reconstruct the Chinese past as the Chinese themselves experienced it rather than in terms of an imported sense of historical problem."[10] For an American scholar, such a conscious effort to overcome the limitations of an outsider's perspective, to break away from the bias of West-centrism, and to understand Chinese history from the inside, following the route of its internal development, readily exemplifies the effort to reach a "correct interpretation" as Gadamer describes, namely, always to "be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought," with one's gaze always directed "on the things themselves." Such an approach is certainly a respectable and responsible one in the study of history.

6. *Ibid*., 154.
7. *Ibid*., 1.
8. *Ibid*., 196.
9. Paul A. Cohen, *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 1.
10. *Ibid*., 186.

And yet, there is no guarantee of a full grasp of historical reality when the historian gets inside and tries to "reconstruct the Chinese past as the Chinese themselves experienced it." In terms of the theory of history, Cohen's paradigm seems to resemble what Giambattista Vico had advocated, or what Wilhelm Dilthey in particular had argued for in the nineteenth century in his *Lebensphilosophie*. Dilthey once claimed that "the first condition of possibility of a science of history is that I myself am a historical being, that the person studying history is the person making history."[11] This certainly reminds us of Vico, who, in reaction against Cartesian skepticism with only the certainty of mathematical knowledge of nature to stand against it, asserted the convertibility of the true and the made (*verum ipsum factum*), and thus the authenticity of historical knowledge. Nature was created by God and therefore only God could know it, but "the world of nations, or civil world," says Vico, "since men had made it, men could come to know."[12] In the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Vico's argument elevated history as the most reliable human knowledge above the study of nature.

Gadamer is not quite satisfied with that argument, however, because Vico's thesis has not solved the problem of historical understanding. Gadamer argues that "positing homogeneity as its condition conceals the real epistemological problem of history. The question is how the individual's experience and the knowledge of it come to be historical experience." As each individual human being is limited in his or her horizon, experience, and knowledge, "the important question remains how such infinite understanding is possible for finite human nature."[13] Vico and Dilthey never really gave a satisfactory answer to such questions. In reconstructing past history, historians must of course try to experience the social condition or event empathetically as best as they can by imagining what people in the past might have experienced, but "empathy" does not replace the historian's horizon, nor does it endow historical knowledge as such with "objectivity." But isn't that the point made clear in Su Shi's poem? "We do not know the true face of Mount Lu, / Because we are all ourselves inside." Thus by emulating an insider's perspective through the act of empathetic understanding, the historian has acquired only a particular insider's point of view still limited by its own finite determinacy.

While advocating an empathetic reconstruction of Chinese history from the perspective of an insider and participant in the historical process, Cohen also tries to cope with the incomprehensibility of the totality of history by disaggregating China "horizontally" into different regions, provinces, prefectures, counties, and cities, and "vertically" into different levels and social strata, thereby promoting the study of regional and local history on the one hand, and popular and nonpopular lower-level history on the other. The huge and multifaceted China is thus cut up and divided into smaller, manageable pieces. In so doing, as Cohen acknowledges himself, he proposed an approach that "is not *China*-centered at all,

11. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 278, quoted from Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 222.

12. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, transl. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), § 331, 96.

13. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 222, 232.

but region-centered, or province-centered or locality-centered."[14] In his survey of China studies in America since the 1970s, he mentioned with approval quite a few works accomplished by applying anthropology, systems theory, and other social-science theories and methodologies to the study of Chinese history. Cohen's "China-centered" paradigm thus acquires yet another distinct feature, namely that "it welcomes with enthusiasm the theories, methodologies, and techniques developed in disciplines other than history (mostly, but not exclusively, the social sciences) and strives to integrate these into historical analysis."[15] As these social-science theories, methodologies, and techniques are all fruits of Western scholarship, however, their applications to the study of Chinese history often clash, almost necessarily, with the "China-centered" paradigm. They may even surreptitiously sabotage that paradigm when such Western theoretical models generate a sense of superiority and the arrogance of "theoretical sophistication" on the part of those who apply them to Chinese materials. Indeed, the actual condition of China studies in America since the 1970s does not have much to show for the success of the "China-centered" paradigm, and when we look at scholarship in the West as a whole, the influence of such a paradigm is even less noticeable.

The French scholar François Jullien in his many publications, for example, always starts from the position of a Western scholar and sees China as the exemplary "Other." He clearly announces that the purpose of studying China is to "return to the self," that "China presents a case study through which to contemplate Western thought from the outside."[16] Indeed, one of his more recent books is significantly titled *Penser d'un dehors (la Chine)* or *Thinking from the Outside (China)*, which treats China as the foil to the West. Following Foucault, Jullien declares that "strictly speaking, *non-Europe* is China, and it cannot be anything else."[17] Though it is perfectly fine for a Western scholar to insist on using China as a mirror to reflect on the Western self, the problem with Jullien's contrastive approach is its very predictable contrastiveness: since it has set the goal of finding contrasts between Chinese and Western concepts, ideas, and values, whatever Jullien finds in his argument is always already predetermined at the outset. This argument thus becomes rather repetitive and predictably contrastive, and eventually turns out to be little more than a reaffirmation of his own anticipations and prejudgments rather than an observation and recognition of what "things themselves" may look like without the distortion of a contrastive perspective.

Jullien's argument often unfolds in a typical pattern in which a Greek or European concept or value is first presented and then found lacking in China. For example, he declares that the Greeks and Westerners under the Greek influence have abstract thinking, while the Chinese have concrete perception; the Greeks have philosophy, while no philosophy exists in China; there is a concept of truth in the West, while the Chinese do not know truth as essence distinct from acciden-

14. Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 162.

15. *Ibid*., 186-187.

16. François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, transl. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 9.

17. François Jullien with Thierry Marchaisse, *Penser d'un dehors (la Chine): entretiens d'extrême-occident* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 39.

tal appearance. In ancient Greece, according to Jullien, truth and being are closely related, but because China "did not conceive of the existential sense of being (the verb *to be*, in that sense, does not even exist in classical Chinese), it had no concept of truth."[18] He also argues that the idea of the Way in the West leads to truth or a transcendental origin, but in China, "the way recommended by wisdom leads to nothing. No truth—revealed or discovered—constitutes its destination."[19] Such a neat either/or contrast between Greece and China, however, tends to oversimplify both cultures and traditions.

Concerning the question of truth, as G. E. R. Lloyd points out, we can "distinguish three main families of positions about truth in Greece, the disputes between which are more or less where our own modern debates started. These are the objectivist, the relativist, and the sceptical."[20] Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, their differences notwithstanding, can all be said to maintain an objectivist position, while Protagoras, who famously said that "a human being is the measure of all things," represents the subjectivist or relativist position. The skeptic position is represented not only by the Pyrrhonian skeptics in the Hellenistic period, but long before them, in the fifth century B.C.E., Gorgias had already put forward a strong version of skepticism by arguing that there is no truth, that even if there is, no one knows it, and that even if you know it, you cannot communicate what truth is. From all these we may conclude, as Lloyd puts it, "that there is no one Greek concept of truth. It is not just that the Greeks disagreed on the answers to the questions: they disagreed on the questions themselves."[21] Now if the ancient Greeks did not have a unified concept of truth, and if the Greek skeptics denied the existence of truth or the possibility of knowing truth, then to claim that the Greeks had a concept of truth, while the Chinese did not, only oversimplifies Greek philosophy on the one hand, and fails to represent the world of ancient Chinese thought adequately on the other.

In his examination of the cultural conflict manifested in the so-called "Chinese rites controversy" during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, Jacques Gernet, another French scholar, also reduced all the differences between Christianity and Chinese culture to the most fundamental level of language and thinking, arguing that these are "not only of different intellectual traditions but also of different mental categories and modes of thought."[22] Gernet maintains that the Chinese are not capable of abstract thinking, that the Chinese language has no grammar, and, pushing the idea to the area of philosophy, he remarks that as a result, "the notion of being, in the sense of an eternal and constant reality, above and beyond that which is phenomenal, was perhaps more difficult to conceive, for a Chinese."[23] In the area of Chinese literary studies, Stephen Owen holds some-

18. François Jullien, "Did Philosophers Have to Become Fixated on Truth?" transl. Janet Lloyd, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 4 (Summer 2002), 810.

19. *Ibid*., 820.

20. G. E. R. Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Civilizations: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53.

21. *Ibid*., 54, 55.

22. Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, transl. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3.

23. *Ibid*., 241.

what similar views. He maintains that the Chinese language, unlike the alphabetic Western languages with their artificial and arbitrary sign systems, "is itself natural," and that Chinese poetry, unlike Western literature as imaginative fiction in the imitation of nature, is a kind of natural manifestation.[24] Whereas the Western poet creates, in imitation of God the first Maker, a fictional world *ex nihilo*, the Chinese poet only "participates in the nature that is." Whereas Western poetry is a literary creation, a Chinese poem presents an "uncreated world," and the Chinese poet, following the example of Confucius, only "transmits but does not create."[25] Consequently Chinese poetry is said to be "nonfictional" and its statement "strictly true," to be literally understood, without the possibility of metaphor, allegory, and imaginative fictionality.[26]

These are only a few examples from Sinological studies that set up an either/or opposition between the East and the West, and all such oppositional arguments share the same problem of predetermination, namely, that they all set up a Western self against which the various aspects of Chinese culture are brought up as its contrast or as a mirror image. These are self-consciously outsiders' points of view, and in their discussions of Chinese language, literature, thought, and culture, these scholars almost totally ignore the insiders, that is, Chinese scholars and their works written in Chinese. This certainly runs counter to the spirit of the "China-centered" paradigm, which tries "to get inside China, to reconstruct Chinese history as far as possible as the Chinese themselves experienced it." For a long time in the twentieth century, there might have been a legitimate reason or a reasonable excuse to ignore native Chinese scholarship because much of that scholarship was under the heavy influence, even the tight ideological control, of official Marxism or Maoism, and hardly any native Chinese scholar was free from the dogmatic ideas of a Marxist or Maoist orthodoxy, particularly in history and in other fields in the humanities and social sciences. But if that was largely, though by no means completely, true of the condition of Chinese scholarship in much of the twentieth century, it is no longer true in China today. The condition of scholarly work in China, along with other aspects of Chinese social life, has changed dramatically in the last twenty to thirty years, and Chinese intellectuals themselves have mostly abandoned the ideological orthodoxy of the past. In fact, things have changed so much that it becomes no longer wise or practical for Western China scholars to ignore native Chinese scholarship.

For example, the very concept of "China" and its meaning in history have become debatable issues in recent scholarship, for which it is quite necessary to hear what Chinese scholars themselves have to say. Western discussions of nation-states are naturally predicated on European history and thus have come to the consensus that the formation of nation-states is a concomitant process as the medieval world came to an end and evolved into early modernity. Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, discusses the nation-state from the perspective of world-systems analysis and declares: "The modern state is a sovereign state. Sovereignty is a

24. Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 20.

25. *Ibid*., 84; quoting Confucius, *The Analects*, vii.1.

26. *Ibid*., 34.

concept that was invented in the modern world-system."[27] Wallerstein's analysis of the nation-state is based completely on European history since the Renaissance and the sixteenth century, but Chinese history, that is, the history of China as a cultural and political entity with a clear distinction between *hua* and *yi* or *civilized* and *barbarian*, goes back to a much earlier period than the Renaissance in Europe. With earliest mention already found in oracle bones and bronze vessels, the word *Zhongguo* or "China" appears in nearly thirty pre-Qin texts. As a concept, the word in ancient classics may have different meanings. "Geographically, it identifies China as the geographical center of the ancient world, while whatever lies outside China in the four directions were considered border areas," says Huang Chun-chieh in discussing the concept of *Zhongguo* in ancient times. "Politically, China was the area of kingly rule . . . while outside was where the ferocious barbarians dwelled. Culturally, China was the center of the civilized world, and outside it were uncivilized areas, called pejoratively *man, yi, rong*, and *di*."[28] At least as early as the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and partly because of the invasion by neighboring nomadic people to the north, the concept of China as a nation-state with well-defined borders and a clear sense of sovereignty was thrust upon the Chinese, mainly the ethnic Han nationals. The sense of being a nation or state among others, the consciousness of being "Chinese" as different from others, as Ge Zhaoguang argues, not only helped legitimize "China" and its "civilization (mainly that of the Han nationality)" in ancient times, but also "became a distant source of the ideology of Chinese nationalism in more recent history."[29] It is of course a gross anachronism to believe that China has always been like what it is today, because both borderlines and the various ethnic components of "China" have undergone changes in history. China today is surely different from China in the past, but it is also a gross mistake to tailor the history and reality of China in order to fit the yardstick of postmodern and postcolonial theories and to think of China as a mere ideological construct, a purely "imagined community."

The way Prasenjit Duara discusses modern Chinese history in *Rescuing History from the Nation* may offer an example of the kind of paradigmatic difficulties one encounters in applying concepts and theoretical approaches formulated in the context of European historical studies to the study of Chinese history. It is certainly admirable for Duara to "rescue history" from the fictitious constructs of the nation-state and to put into question and interrogate the subject of "Enlightenment history" and the teleological model of a "linear history." Against that model, Duara proposed what he calls a "bifurcated" conception of history, though that conception has been questioned by some Chinese scholars.[30] On the one hand,

27. Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 42.

28. Huang Chun-chieh, "The Idea of *Zhongguo* and Its Transformation in Early Modern Japan and Contemporary Taiwan," *Taiwan Dong Ya wenmin yanjiu xuekan* [*Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*] 3, no. 2 (December 2006), 93. All translations from Chinese are mine.

29. Ge Zhaoguang, "The Rise of the Consciousness of China in the Song Dynasty—A Distant Source of the Ideology of Nationalism in More Recent History," in *Gudai Zhongguo de lishi, sixiang yu zongjiao* [*History, Ideas, and Religion in Ancient China*] (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2006), 151.

30. See Li Meng, "Whose History to Rescue?" *Ershi yi shiji* [*Twenty-First Century*], no. 49 (October 1998), 128-133.

Duara criticizes the grand narratives of national unity constructed from the perspective of nationalism, arguing that "national history secures for the contested and contingent nation the false unity of a self-same, national subject evolving through time."[31] On the other hand, however, he has no alternative but to acknowledge that "it is—as yet—impossible to radically displace the nation as the locus of history."[32] The nation is not, after all, a completely fictitious construct. As a scholar originally from India, Duara is suspicious of the discourse of the nation-state modeled on European examples, and thus he cannot come to a complete agreement with the idea that the nation-state is a modern product. In discussing some Western scholars' concept of the nation-state in terms of a particular identity, he remarks,

> In privileging modern society as the only social form capable of generating political self-awareness, [Ernest] Gellner and [Benedict] Anderson regard national identity as a distinctly modern mode of consciousness: the nation as a whole imagining itself to be the cohesive subject of history. The empirical record does not furnish the basis for such a strong statement about the polarity between the modern and the premodern. Individuals and groups in both modern and agrarian societies identify simultaneously with several communities, all of which are imagined; these identifications are historically changeable and often conflicted internally with each other. Whether in India or China, people historically identified with different representations of communities, and when these identifications became politicized, they came to resemble what is called modern "national identities.[33]

This shows that quite appropriately Duara has a sense of alertness, a kind of postcolonial sensibility, toward theoretical models based on European history. He realizes that the Chinese in the past already had a strong sense of identity and that "the representation of the ethnic nation is most evident in the Song."[34] And yet, his discussion of India and China is very far from the kind of "China-centered" approach Cohen espoused. In fact, he has raised a number of questions about Cohen's approach. "Do Chinese historical materials," asks Duara, "prefigure a certain narrative of their own which Western and Chinese historians have to listen closely to and then reproduce as best they can? Or are the historical materials simply 'noise,' heterophony, the meaning of which is disclosed by the narratives through which the historian 'symbolizes' them?"[35] In discussing recent Chinese history, Duara borrows heavily from contemporary Western theories, concepts, and terms in the humanities and social sciences, and his writing has all the typical discursive features of a Western scholarly argument. At the same time, Cohen has his own reservations about the kind of "postmodern scholarship" in the works of Duara and James Hevia, finding in them "a deplorable tendency, through the unchecked use of abstract conceptual formulations and neologisms, to build intellectual walls around themselves and what they are up to."[36] As Cohen sees it, these works, burdened by neologisms and novel ideas borrowed from Western theories,

31. Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

32. *Ibid*., 6.

33. *Ibid*., 54.

34. *Ibid*., 59.

35. *Ibid*., 26.

36. Cohen, *China Unbound*, 193.

are still a far cry from the "China-centered" historiography he has advocated, and they are, to a large extent, West-centered works very different from what a Chinese participant in Chinese history would have experienced.

But by now it should be clear that I do not see any particular epistemological advantage in either Cohen's "China-centered" approach or a Western Sinological perspective; or to put it differently, neither insiders nor outsiders have privileged access to knowledge in understanding China, its history, society, culture, and tradition. At best, insiders and outsiders are all limited in their respective horizons and finite determinacy, and at worst, the insider's blind spots are matched only by the outsider's ignorance and lack of sensitivity. In an insightful 1972 essay, the famous sociologist Robert Merton had already exposed the limitations of both insiders and outsiders who claim to have a *monopolistic* or *privileged* access to certain kinds of knowledge. "In structural terms," says Merton, "we are all, of course, both Insiders and Outsiders, members of some groups and, sometimes derivatively, not of others; occupants of certain statuses which thereby exclude us from occupying other cognate statuses." This is obvious in any individual or social group, but more important is "the crucial fact of social structure that individuals have not a single status but a status set: a complement of variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behavior and perspectives."[37] More recently, Amartya Sen puts emphasis on the same crucial fact when he argues that it is the illusion of singular and exclusive identities that breeds conflict and war in our world. "Violence is fomented," says Sen, "by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible people, championed by proficient artisans of terror."[38] In making sense of identities, he goes on to argue, we must realize that we always have plural affiliations and multiple identities: "We are all individually involved in identities of various kinds in disparate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or associations, or social activities."[39]

With such insights into our plural and interrelated "statuses" or multiple "identities," we can now come to the conclusion that it is foolish to believe that only Chinese can understand China or, equally absurdly, that only a Sinologist can give us true and objective knowledge about China. The point is that no particular horizon or perspective can guarantee better knowledge, but that knowledge or scholarship as such should be assessed with a set of intellectual criteria that transcends the simple opposition between native scholarship and Sinological lore, or an insider's historical experience and an outsider's critical reflection. Understanding China and Chinese history requires integration of different views from different perspectives, but such integration is not a simple juxtaposition of insiders' and outsiders' views; it is more of an act of interaction and mutual illumination than adding up native Chinese scholarship and Western Sinology. "We no longer ask whether it is the Insider or the Outsider who has monopolistic or privileged access

37. Robert K. Merton, "The Perspectives of Insiders and Outsiders," in *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, ed. Norman W. Storer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 113.

38. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 2.

39. *Ibid*., 23.

to social knowledge," to quote Merton's apposite words again, "instead, we begin to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of seeking truth."[40] In the pursuit of knowledge, being an insider or an outsider is often functionally irrelevant, and we must negotiate among our plural affiliations and multiple identities as well as those of others in order to reach a better understanding.

Let us now return to the poem by Su Shi quoted at the beginning of this essay and to the whole issue of horizons and perspectives, insiders and outsiders. The last two lines of this poem are the most famous, and they definitely speak of the limitation and blindness of an insider's perspective. In a sense the entire poem falls victim to the success of its last two lines, because a careful reading will reveal that Su Shi's poem actually does not privilege any particular point of view; that the "true face of Mount Lu" is presented not as one single face, but many faces, changing as the viewer moves to different locations and takes different positions, "high or low, or far or nearby." Mount Lu can be seen as a range, but it may also appear as a cliff, and neither is the only "true face." What we get from this little poem is the limitation of human knowledge because of our finite horizons and perspectives. Such limitations, the fact that understanding is always tied to one's "finite determinacy," are part of the human condition of our existence; therefore neither insiders nor outsiders have privileged access to true knowledge. To read Su Shi's poem as privileging the outsider's view is only to misread it. Either inside or outside, we do not know the true face of Mount Lu; or, either from the inside or the outside, far away or up close, we always see the mountain from a particular angle, with a particular point of view.

The mountain metaphor for understanding history is appropriate, for as E. H. Carr argues, though we should discard the positivistic notion of "objectivity," the finite determinacy of our own horizon cannot erase the existence of "the things themselves." Carr remarks, as though in conversation with Su Shi:

> It does not follow that, because a mountain appears to take on different shapes from different angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes. It does not follow that, because interpretation plays a necessary part in establishing the facts of history, and because no existing interpretation is wholly objective, one interpretation is as good as another, and the facts of history are in principle not amenable to objective interpretation.[41]

The mountain metaphor works to the extent that historical events always happen at particular locations and geographical territories, in concrete circumstances and with materiality of their own. Nation, sovereignty, people and their cultures all have spatial connotations. History as such, however, means more than just the concrete, material, and territorial, and therefore its richness and complexity cannot be captured entirely by the mountain metaphor. Historiography not only as record but also as interpretation involves more than what the concrete mountain metaphor may suggest, as it must have the historian's engagement and participation, thus the limitations of horizons and perspectives. In that sense, Su Shi's poem on Mount Lu is more instructive than a simple description of a mountain,

40. Merton, *The Sociology of Science*, 129.
41. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1964), 26-27.

for it speaks more of the difficulty of understanding than the presence of "things themselves," though the existence of the mountain is tacitly acknowledged. This difficulty, the limitation of our horizons and our finite determinacy, the difficulty of knowing something far away or up close, constitutes the challenge of China studies as it does all other humanistic disciplines. But it also encourages us to open up to different perspectives and other views, to look from various angles, to judge all with a set of intellectual criteria that transcends group allegiances and local identities, and to reach what might be a closer approximation of Mount Lu, or whatever it is that we set out to study.

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